

Julian Assange: One Year in Belmarsh

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It should not be a matter of distinction, but Julian Assange is a figure who is becoming the apotheosis of political imprisonment. This seems laughable to those convinced he is an agent without scruple, a compromiser of the Fourth Estate, a figure best packed off to a prison system that will, in all assuredness, kill him.

That's if he even gets there. Having spent a year at Her Majesty's Belmarsh prison, the WikiLeaks publisher faces the permanent danger of contracting COVID-19 as he goes through the bone-weariness of legal proceedings. Even during the extradition hearings, he has been treated with a snooty callousness by District Court Judge Vanessa Baraitser, which does not bode well for a favourable finding against the US submission. As he endures them, he suffers in a facility that is succumbing to the misrule caused by the coronavirus.

On April 9, Assange's friend Vaughan Smith [gave a description](#) of conditions that gave little cause for Easter cheer. "Julian is now confined alone in a cell for 23.5 hours every day. He gets half an hour of exercise and that is in a yard crowded with other prisoners." Smith also had a shot at the running of the prison. "With over 150 Belmarsh prison staff off work self-isolating, the prison is barely functioning."

The UK Department of Justice has adopted a mild approach to the issue of releasing prisoners in the face of the coronavirus epidemic. Despite the Prison Governors' Association suggesting the release of 15,000 non-violent prisoners, the Department of Justice has opted for the lower total of 4,000. To date, a meagre 100 have been released. Assange insists that the situation is graver at Belmarsh than is otherwise advertised. Official figures put the number of COVID-19 deaths at one in the maximum security facility. There are at least two, with the possibility, argues Assange, of more.

By any reasonable assessment, Assange fits the bill of a non-violent prisoner, and one with genuine political credentials. He was granted asylum by Ecuador, a point of little interest to Baraitser. His condition both physical and mental has appalled friends, acquaintances and a number of officials. Nils Melzer, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, has spent much time beating the drum of awareness about his plight. Since 2010, [he stated](#) in May last year, "there has been a relentless and unrestrained campaign of public mobbing, intimidation and defamation against Mr Assange, not only in the United States, but also in the United Kingdom, Sweden and, more recently, in Ecuador."

Rather than turning their attention to this state of circumstances, news outlets prefer to gorge themselves on other details, such as the newly revealed identity of his partner, which Judge Baraitser refused to keep concealed. The writing on this subject is needlessly though

predictably tawdry. “WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange fathered two sons while hiding in embassy,” has been a favourite formulation. The *Daily Mail* can barely resist stirring the sauce pot, [giving](#) Assange the appearance of an international man of fornicating mystery. “Gabriel, aged two, and his one-year-old brother Max were conceived while their father was hiding out to avoid extradition to America, where he faces espionage charges over the leaking of thousands of classified US intelligence documents.” But the man who sowed his oats was also, the *Mail* is thrilled to remind us, “wanted in Sweden where he was accused of rape.” It was rather good of them to also tell readers that Swedish prosecutors dropped the investigation, though it does so with customary scepticism.

The old hacks can barely resist regarding the entire matter of Assange having a partner and children as peculiar. The *Mail* seemed to think it had uncovered a stunning morsel of information that would shock all. “The news will come as a bombshell to Assange’s friends and enemies since he was widely understood to have led a near-monastic life since entering the embassy in 2012.” Monks would surely disagree with that flawed assessment, as would his friends.

The theme of oddity has also made it across the Atlantic. The *New York Post*, for instance, [considered it](#) “an even odder twist” that “British rapper M.I.A. is a godmother to the children”. Hardly – M.I.A, along with a large clutch of celebrities, has been a vocal supporter and barracker.

This mixture of lazy scribbling, creepy curiosity and saccharine interest will do little to aid Assange. His partner, now revealed as lawyer Stella Moris-Smith Robertson, attempted to take some of the edge off perceptions of the publisher in a court statement supporting bail. “My close relationship with Julian has been the opposite of how he is viewed – of reserve, respect for each other and attempts to shield each other from some of the nightmares that have surrounded our lives.” Retaining that shield will be an increasingly difficult matter now.

Assange’s scalp is precious. The application for bail made by his defence team on March 25 was denied. Access to him from his legal team is limited, hobbling the case. Even during a raging pandemic, where entire states have mobilised their resources, there is always room for little bit of vindictiveness. Scores need to be settled; the balance sheet ordered. To that end, Judge Baraister and the UK justice system, have not disappointed.

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